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ABSTRACT

In order to develop baseline information from which strengths and weaknesses of present parent education services could be identified, this study examined parent education in a sparsely populated rural state. The participants, 358 professionals in education and social service, were asked to respond to a mail survey within 2 weeks. No follow-up mailings or phone calls were made. A total of 303 surveys were returned for an 85 percent return rate. Results indicated that 49 percent of the respondents offered parent education services. Most parent educators were college educated or had training in parent education through college coursework or through specific parent education training workshops. Individuals providing parent education included psychologists, social workers, teachers, physicians, nurses, and family life specialists. Most parent educators were parents themselves. Most responding agencies used commercial parent education kits, with Active Parenting and Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) being the most common. Topics included parenting children of various ages, child development information, fetal alcohol syndrome, parents' rights, and discipline. The topics covered were related to the type of agency providing parent education. Consumers of parent education included mothers, fathers, single parents, guardians, stepparents, foster parents, grandparents, parents-to-be, teen parents, court-ordered participants, high school students, childcare providers, surrogate parents, siblings, and professionals. A variety of structures for service delivery were used, including group meetings, individual family conferences, newsletters, and home visits. Government funding from federal, state, county, or city funds provided much of the funding, with funding sources varying by agency. (KDFB)

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Parent Education in a Rural State

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Parents are their children's first and most important teachers, yet many parents lack the skills to parent. Parents typically learn parenting skills from their parents, but the increased number of dysfunctional families and the lack of good role models is taking its toll on society. The removal of young families from extended families in our migratory society has contributed to a decrease in older generation or more experienced mentors for young parents. Few high school, vocational, or college students participate in coursework that teaches child development or parenting skills. "Parent education can be viewed as an effort to formalize what traditionally existed informally." (Cooke and Thomas, 1985, p. 1)

According to Tresch and Mulvihill (1994), parents who participate in parent education score higher on parent knowledge tests, have more confidence as parents in providing developmentally appropriate practice in their home environments, and their children benefit in later school performance. Parent education not only benefits the parents, but the children, family, schools, and society as a whole. Parent education can make a meaningful contribution to child development (Levitt and Cohen, 1976).

One of the nation's current education goals addresses the importance of parent education. "By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children" (U.S. Department of Education, 1995, p. 44). The Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades (1996) advocates effective parent education and family support programs in states and communities.

Purpose

Because the need for parent education has been recognized, it is necessary to identify which agencies are providing parent education, who the parent educators are, what the content of the parent education curriculum is, who the consumers of parent education are, how parent education is structured, and how parent education is funded. By obtaining baseline information, strengths and weaknesses of present parent education services can be identified and recommendations can be made for building a service delivery system.

Method

Subjects

Three-hundred and fifty-eight professionals representing education and social services fields were surveyed in a sparsely populated rural state.

Instrument

A survey instrument was developed. Two items sought to identify the respondent by agency and by size of community. A gatekeeper question asked if parent education services were provided or not. Nine research questions related to parent education services followed the gatekeeper question and were to be answered only by those agencies providing parent education services.

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Procedures

The survey, a cover letter, and a stamped, self-addressed envelope were sent to the subjects. Subjects were asked to respond within two weeks of the mailing. No follow-up mailings or phone calls were made.

Data Sources

Public schools, Bureau of Indian Affairs Schools, Educational Cooperatives, Private Schools, Parochial Schools, Non-Profit Schools, State Schools, Community Education, Interagency Councils, Hospitals, Mental Health Agencies, Social Service Agencies, County Extension, Head Start, Non-Profit Agencies, and Other Miscellaneous public service agencies were contacted.

Results

Three-hundred and three surveys were returned out of the three hundred and fifty-eight mailed; this represents an 85% rate of return. Of the three hundred and three responses, one hundred and forty-nine (49%) respondents offered parent education services.

Agencies Providing Parent Education Services

Agency	% offering Parent Education Services
Head Start	100%
County Extension Agencies	89%
Interagency Councils	83%
Bureau of Indian Affairs Schools (BIA)	71%
Mental Health Agencies	60%
Community Education Agencies	50%
Educational Cooperatives	50%
Penitentiaries	50%
Group Homes	50%
Support Groups	50%
Residential Treatment Centers	50%
Technical Institutes	50%
Youth Services	50%
Home Health	50%
Child Care	50%
Hospitals	35%
Private Schools	35%
Public Schools	32%
Social Service Agencies	9%

Identifying the Parent Educators

Parent educators are not certified in this rural state. Most parent educators in this rural state are college educated or have some training in parent education either through college coursework or through specific parent education training workshops. Some parent educators are psychologists or therapists or school counselors or social workers. Others are teachers or principals or doctors or nurses. Other professionals that serve as parent educators include clergy, attorneys, or family life specialists. Some parent educators hold the Child Development Associate credential and some are from law enforcement agencies. Most parent educators are parents themselves, are knowledgeable about parent education topics, and are interested or experienced in parent education. Some parent educators assume this role as a part of their jobs because their jobs are related to child development, child protection, or teaching.

> "This is the first time we will be offering a parenting class. We will be utilizing the Active Parenting video-based program. The presenters/teachers are the high school guidance counselor, drug alcohol coordinator, and county extension agent-home economist. We will be teaching the class together."
>
> ---comment from respondent at a Public School

> "As a parent of two children with special needs, I am able to offer counseling as a psychotherapist/social worker but draw on networking and life experience to help the families share, have a more positive outlook, and not feel alone."
>
> ---comment from a respondent at a non-profit agency

The Content of the Parent Education Curriculum

Curriculum content for parent education varies. Most of the responding agencies report using commercial parent education kits, but they also address topics through speakers, videos, discussions, books, and experiential exercises. County extension reports mailing parenting newsletters in addition to conducting group sessions. Topics are related to parenting infants and toddlers, parenting preschoolers, parenting school-age children, parenting teens, parenting children with special needs, and teen parenting. Child development information is shared in all programs. The topic of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is discussed in the BIA schools, while parents' rights are included in the topics discussed at Educational Cooperative parent meetings. Responding Interagency Councils report additional topics such as parenting a sexually abused child, assessment and screenings, health, stress management, adoption, and childbirth. Hospitals are primarily concerned with educating parents about the care of newborns, but also address other topics including mental health. Mental health agencies are more likely to address the topic of alcohol and drugs, while Head Start parents learn more about discipline.

> "This year our class will focus more on parenting infant/toddlers and preschoolers and child development as this is the focus of Part H."
>
> ---comment from respondent at an Interagency Council

> "Our courses are more specifically childbirth, early pregnancy, etc... But do cover and provide material for parenting in the first year of baby's life."
>
> ---comment from respondent at a hospital

"We do not have a 'formalized curriculum' with the parents attending with children. We role model good parenting skills and give ideas to parents when they are disciplining inappropriately."---comment from respondent at Head Start

Parent Education Curriculum: % of Use of Marketed Kits	
27%	Active Parenting
25%	S.T.E.P. (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting)
13%	How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk
9%	Teen S.T.E.P. (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting)
9%	Parents as Teachers
6%	Responsive Parenting
4%	Common Sense Parenting: Boys Town Model
>1% each	Baby and Me, Confident Parenting, Discovering Normal, New Beginnings, Parentmaking, Practical Parenting, Project Takoja, Project Tetakuya, Teen Parenting, Welcome Baby

Consumers of Parent Education Services

Participants in parent education include mothers, fathers, single parents, guardians, stepparents, foster parents, grandparents, parents-to-be, teen parents, court ordered participants (both parents and people in relationships with parents), high school students, childcare providers, surrogate parents, siblings, and professionals like social workers or attorneys. The majority of participants in this rural state are Caucasians or Native Americans, but Mexican Americans, Afro-Americans, and Asian Americans are also served. A low incidence of reported participants are immigrants from the Sudan, Ethiopia, and Russia or are members of the Hutterite Community.

"We do have a person who comes into our school who works with pregnant students or students who parent their child. She has classes for these young adult/teen parents."---comment from respondent at a Public School

"Parents are also referred by the Division of Social Services and therapists."
---comment from respondent at a Mental Health Center

"Our agency does group and individual parenting for Child Protection Services' clients and interested community members. Individual services are for Child Protection Services families only."
---comment from respondent at a Social Service Agency

Structure of Parent Education Services

Parent education is structured in a variety of ways. Parent education services are delivered to individual families, small groups, and large groups. Some agencies offer parent education only through a newsletter format. Other agencies offer home visits exclusively or in combination with a group meeting. Frequency of meetings varied. Most parent education programming met weekly for 4-8 weeks either quarterly, bi-annually, or annually. Only one program reported meeting twice a week; and only one program (Family Life Education in a high school setting) met daily for 9 months. Over 1/3 of the programs held two-hour meetings; 1/3 of the programs had one and one-half hour meetings;nearly 1/3 of the programs met for 1 hour.

> "Fall seems to be the best time when parents are still enthused about getting their students a good start in the school year."
> ---comment from respondent at a Public School

> "Informal small groups make a world of difference for discussion and involvement."---comment from respondent at a Bureau of Indian Affairs School

> "We do perform 'parent education' of sorts through our service coordination for families of infants and toddlers with special needs. These are not classes per say, but one-on-one contacts with families who request services/are qualified to receive services."---comment from respondent at an Interagency Council

> "We have offered an array of parent education services from a structured six session group education service to a one hour video during a regularly scheduled therapy session." ---comment from a respondent at a Mental Health Agency

> "Parenting skills and strategies for others are included in newsletters and newspaper columns several times each year."
> ---comment from a respondent from County Extension

> "Parenting topics are integrated into the Resourceful Living program conducted on a monthly basis. Topics are also part of an annual child care providers' conference."---comment from a respondent from County Extension

> "Our parent education takes place during weekly home visits to each family. We also offer a Family Night once each month for larger groups on specific topics." ---comment from a respondent from Head Start

Funding for Parent Education

Government funding through federal, state, county, or city funds provides much of the funding for parent education. However, funding sources vary by agency. For example, Head Start has federal funding while non-profit agencies operate with United Way funds; County Extension parent education programs are funded primarily by county funds. Grant funding that has been tapped for parent education includes grants from Drugfree-Violence Prevention in the Schools, Drug and Alcohol Prevention, Carl Perkins, Part H, Even Start, Healthy Start, Title I, American Association of Lutherans, Parents as Teachers, or from a local foundation. Some parent education programs are sponsored by United Way or a church. Hospitals or mental

health agencies bill insurance as one form of funding parent education. Some parent education programs seek private donations or conduct fundraisers or charge fees.

> "We do activities with Title I and Special Education parents. There is no funding for anything else..."---comment from respondent at a Public School

> "Because of the isolated rural areas, I drive anywhere from 75 to 100 miles one way to get to homes and the outlying communities. I donate a lot of my time for and to my families and parents and children due to the shortage of funds." ---comment from respondent at a Bureau of Indian Affairs School

> "This program is presently having funding concerns, but we are optimistic that it will prevail!"---comment from respondent at an Educational Cooperative

> "We started our program by borrowing materials from another school. Then we wrote and received a grant from the Department of Social Services. The grant covered materials, salary, and childcare. The next year, we did not get the grant. Now we pay no salary and do not charge because we have books. This year we will pay childcare with grant funds from another source that may also disappear."
> ---comment from respondent at an Interagency Council

Discussion

While the need for parent education services is recognized, the services which are offered in this rural state vary both within and between communities. Services are imbedded within established agencies, but are inconsistent within agencies. Parents who are seeking such services have no single point of contact to act as a referral source for parenting information. No general recommendations could be made to parents regarding where they might go for parent education services at different parenting stages. There is a need to systematize parent education services.

Professional training for parent educators is undefined. No standards exist in this state for educating parents. In order to insure quality experiences using recognized adult education methods and research-based information, there is a need for training and standards to be defined for people who serve in a parent education role.

Curriculum development appears to be limited. It is largely dependent on marketed parent education programs, so the curriculum may not be reaching the individual needs of parents or the specific needs of communities. There is a need for coursework to be sequential to meet the needs of the consumers at various life stages and parenting stages. Curricula that relate to the topics pertinent to each of the parenting stages need to be developed and made available through a centralized source like a state curriculum service or a state library.

The consumers of parent education represent a broad cross-section of those who parent as well as those who may parent in the future. In order to foster good parenting skills, parent education courses should begin in the high schools and be available for each stage of the parenting process from pre-parenting to the empty nest stage. It should be noted that some of the consumers are court-ordered participants. The focus for marketing parent education needs to shift from that of "fixing bad situations" to "assisting all parents to be better parents".

This study reflects the diversity of parent education services---from newsletters to meetings; from weekly meetings to an annual meeting; from individual services to large group meetings; from a series of classes to disjointed topical meetings. While diversity may offer options for participation in parent education, it can also be seen as unpredictable. By offering a variety of predictable services on a regular basis, parents could better access programming to meet their needs.

While there appears to be a variety of funding sources, there is no one dependable source for funding parent education to span the various parenting stages. Programs reported seeking multiple sources of funding because sources tapped in the past were no longer available. In order to assure consistency and continuity in programming, funding must be assured.

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